

First Chance Delaware

First Lady Tracey Quillen Carney's remarks as prepared for delivery at the [announcement](#) of [First Chance Delaware](#) – an initiative led by the First Lady to recognize and facilitate effective partnerships, to share research and best practices, and to promote opportunities to collaborate in support of Delaware's children.

But then Paul DiLorenzo from Casey asked us to think bigger, more in terms of promotion than response; and of course, that instantly made sense. When Jackie Mette first suggested that we apply to Casey Family Programs for a First Spouse Initiative Grant, I knew I wanted it to be about giving kids a chance to succeed, a chance to recognize and work toward their potential. So we started to think about specific programs that would do that in targeted ways – a kind of traditional approach for a first spouse; identify a need, a way to respond, and focus on it for as long as you're here.

If our goal is, in a foundational way, to give Delaware's children a chance to succeed, we can't do that with one program; and we can't do it by responding just to how kids suffer when they crash into obstacles; we have to deal with the obstacles themselves.

That's the reality John recognized when, in his one of his first initiatives as Governor, he re-established the Family Services Cabinet Council. **When families face foundational challenges, like access to stable housing and nutritious food, each adversity deepens all of the others, in a geometric – and generational – erosion of opportunity. So to be effective – and certainly, to be efficient – the efforts to alleviate**

those challenges must also be inter-connected and mutually reinforcing.

Our [First Chance Initiative](#), with a founding grant from Casey Family Programs, seeks to encourage a coordinated, intentional, and evolving culture of commitment to Delaware's children – to make the First State a place where every child has a First Chance to succeed.

The why of the First Chance Initiative is pretty obvious:

- It's our shared interest in public health, educational excellence and workforce development; in attracting businesses and talented employees, based on the skills of Delawareans and on the quality of life in our state;
- it's our interest in saving on emergency medical costs and other crisis interventions;
- it's our interest in parent-employee productivity and retention, and in supporting community safety and sustainability, by building on the fundamental strength of families.
- And, even more obviously, it's our moral obligation – to give kids a chance, a First Chance, to succeed.

As for the how of the First Chance Initiative:

First, we want to recognize cross-sector collaborations that are working, to promote awareness of what's out there – both for families who might benefit and for prospective partners, who share an interest and want to get involved.

Second, we want to take that intentional, coordinated approach to expanding successful programs, especially where parents, children, and teens are engaged in partnerships and settings that they trust – partnerships like our evidence-based home visiting programs for newborns and moms; settings like our Boys & Girls Clubs, community centers, Y's, libraries, faith-

based settings, and public schools where adults invest in building strong relationships with students. While we have kids and families in these trusted programs and settings, how can we better coordinate a mutually reinforcing First Chance web of support and opportunity?

In our year of groundwork for the First Chance Initiative, we've focused on partnerships in three areas –

- 1. Addressing childhood hunger,**
- 2. Promoting early literacy, and**
- 3. Expanding trauma-informed care.**

Good things are happening, and again, we want to build on those successes.

Good things like the program to help struggling readers, a program I had a chance to see in action at Manor Elementary School. The program is a partnership among the Reading Assist Institute and its private and public supporters, the Colonial School District, and AmeriCorps. We're going to celebrate three years of that partnership at an end-of-year bash on April 26th, with food provided by the culinary arts students at William Penn.



First Lady Tracey Quillen Carney visits Wilmington Manor Elementary in New Castle.

Good things are happening.

Good things like Compassionate Connections, a partnership I've been privileged to join.

The work started when Compassionate Schools, a national program, joined with Delaware's Department of Education – with early involvement from the University of Delaware, and, once again, lead funding from Casey Family Programs. The Compassionate Schools work expanded, with deepening commitment from those early partners, and inspired by a grassroots push from members of the Delaware State Education Association. DSEA earned a National Education Association grant to form Compassionate Connections and to launch a three-year pilot program in five schools.

Compassionate Connections, again, involves all of the original Compassionate Schools partners, including Casey – and also:

- Children and Families First,
- the Office of the Child Advocate,
- the Parents Advisory Council for Education,
- the Red Clay and Christina School Districts,
- the Wilmington Advisory Council,
- the Family Services Cabinet Council's ACEs Subcommittee,
- the ACLU,
- the Rodel Foundation,
- and the Department of Services for Children, Youth, and their Families – aka, Secretary Manning's "Kids Department."

In addition to that collaboration, many schools apply the new Opportunity Grants toward trauma-informed work. A shoutout, too, to Wilmington University, which now offers a certificate in Trauma Informed Approaches, as a complement to degrees in six different majors.

This isn't touchy-feely stuff; as we now know, this is brain science and biology – with implications for every family, school, work place, and neighborhood.

Good things are happening, like the collaboration I am proud to introduce as our inaugural First Chance Program – our state task force on childhood hunger. I want to thank Charlotte McGarry, from the Food Bank of Delaware; Ray Fitzgerald, Director of Social Services at DHSS; and Aimee Beam, from the Department of Education – as well as the task force's partners, which include:

- the Harry K Foundation,
- Secretary Bunting, superintendents, principals, and members of the Delaware School Nutrition Association,
- the Department of Agriculture and Delaware farmers,
- all of our Summer Food Service and after-school partners,

- and the regional office of the USDA.

If we're going to give kids a First Chance to succeed, what better place to start, than fighting childhood hunger.

It doesn't take a lot of data to figure it out – have you ever been at your best when you were hungry? I've had the misfortune, on occasion, to be with our Governor when he's hungry – it's not something you want to see.

Our task force on childhood hunger has set specific goals to:

- increase participation in school breakfast,
- improve our effectiveness in serving summer meals,
- expand opportunities for after-school meals and snacks,
- and, with the help of the Harry K Foundation, to make sure that every school with a [basic needs closet](#), also has a food pantry.

The goals of the task force are aggregate; not one for the Food Bank, one for DHSS, and one for DOE, not one for philanthropy and one for reimbursable programs.

We have shared goals – because we have shared goals, and a common interest in achieving them – again, whether you look at it from an economic, quality of life, or moral point of view.

In building a statewide culture of commitment to children – as we review budgets, policies, and programs – let's ask what each of us can do, what each of our agencies, businesses, and funding sources can do, to break down silos in support of shared goals, to engage in creative, common-sense collaborations, to give kids a First Chance to succeed.

I am privileged to have the opportunity to invest the convening power and platform of the First Lady's role toward the First Chance Initiative.

Delawareans can learn more about First Lady Tracey Quillen Carney's "First Chance Delaware" initiative, and sign up to help, at de.gov/firstchance.